

Entre Autres: Conflict and Complexity at L'Hermitage

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ABSTRACT

In 1793, the Vincendière family came to Frederick County, Maryland from the colony of Saint-Domingue within what is now Monocacy National Battlefield. Bringing 12 of their enslaved laborers with them, the Vincendières acquired land and labor that eventually comprised a 748-acre plantation called *L'Hermitage*. By 1800, *L'Hermitage* was home to 90 enslaved African-Americans, making the Vincendières among the largest slaveholders in Maryland. Archeological and historical research at the site reveals a complex and varied landscape where manipulation, control, and power relationships ruled, coloring interactions between the Vincendière family, their enslaved population, and the local community. Literally “buried” within a Civil War battlefield, the story of *L'Hermitage* provides a platform from which to interpret slavery and the cultural clash that sparked the Civil War.

Introduction

As the Age of Enlightenment drew to a close, the winds of rebellion blew through the Americas and Europe. Shortly after the successful overthrow of British rule by the American colonists during the Revolutionary War, the people of France rose up to reject the monarchy that had ruled them for centuries. Just two years after France established the principle of self-government in 1789, the enslaved population in the French colony of Saint-Domingue began a massive uprising, the largest – and only successful – slave revolt in history.

It was against this backdrop that the Vincendière family – coffee, indigo, and sugar planters from the western part of Saint-Domingue – fled to the United States, arriving mainly through the port of Baltimore in October 1793. They brought twelve enslaved laborers with them, and settled shortly thereafter in Frederick County. By 1800, they had assembled a 748-acre plantation known as *L'Hermitage*, as well as 90 enslaved laborers, making them the second-largest slaveholders in Frederick County and among the largest in the state of Maryland. Why the Vincendière family chose to invest in, and maintain, such a large enslaved population is unclear; indeed, many of the questions about the choices the Vincendières made, and the lives they built, remain unanswered. However, over a decade of historical and archeological research has revealed much about the people, both enslaved and free, who lived at *L'Hermitage*.

Revolt and Relocation

In the decades leading up to the slave revolt, Saint-Domingue was France's most profitable colony and the supreme example of the massive profits that could be made through the brutality of slavery. Saint-Domingue was the world's leading producer of both sugar and coffee, exporting half the world's coffee and as much sugar as Jamaica, Cuba, and Brazil combined. Such productivity came at a dear cost; as many as 685,000 slaves were imported into the colony

in the eighteenth century alone. On average, half of the slaves brought from Africa died within a few years of their arrival; in fact, between 5 and 10 percent of Saint-Domingue's plantation slaves died every year of overwork, malnutrition, disease, and despair. Unburdened by humanitarian concerns, planters in Saint-Domingue coldly calculated that working slaves as hard as possible with minimal investment in food, clothing, shelter, and medical care was more profitable than encouraging natural increase. Thus, enslaved people were like tools to be used until they were broken, at which point they were discarded and replaced.

In 1789 there were nearly a half million slaves in Saint-Domingue, compared to 31,000 whites and 28,000 free people of color. As their mother country struggled with the spasms of democracy, there was constant fear among Saint-Domingue's planters that the "contagion of liberty" would infect the enslaved population. On August 23, 1791 the rebellion finally broke out, spreading throughout the colony and swallowing up everything in its path.

There is some evidence that the Vincendière family sought to recreate the slave system that they were familiar with in their native Saint-Domingue after their emigration to Maryland. They began acquiring land in Frederick County in 1794 and had assembled the 748-acre *L'Hermitage* plantation by 1798. By 1800, in addition to the 12 brought from Saint-Domingue, they had 90 enslaved laborers, whom they put to the task of cultivating wheat, clover, and other crops. They may also have utilized slave labor in a secondary enterprise such as lime manufacture, and they may have been hiring enslaved laborers out to other plantations and farms.

An eye-witness account written in June of 1798 indicates that the Vincendière family instituted slavery in a style and on a scale not previously seen in Frederick County:

June 15 [1798]. Four miles from the town we forded the river. On its banks one can see a row of wooden houses and one stone house with the upper storeys painted white. This is the residence of a Frenchman called Payant, who left San Domingo with a substantial sum and with it bought a two or three thousand acres of land and a few hundred negroes whom he treats with the greatest tyranny. One can see on the home farm instruments of torture, stocks, wooden horses, whips, etc. Two or three negroes crippled with torture have brought legal action against him, but the matter has not yet been settled. This man is 60 years old, without children or relatives; he keeps an old French woman with two daughters; she, in sweetness of humour, even surpasses him. This charming group has caused about 50 legal actions to be brought. They foam with rage, beat the negroes, complain and fight with each other. In these ways does this man use his wealth, and comforts his life in its descent toward the grave.

There is ample evidence support this description; it refers to a structure that still stands on the farm, and mentions by name Jean Payen de Boisneuf, a distant relative of the Vincendière family who accompanied them on their flight from the colony and resided at *L'Hermitage*. The "row of wooden houses" is a reference to slave quarters on the farm, the presence of which has been confirmed by recent archeological excavations, which identified the footprint of at least six individual structures well in front of the primary building cluster; quite literally the "row of wooden houses" mentioned in the account.

Of particular interest is the spatial arrangement of the plantation. The slave quarters are situated well in front of the main house, a pattern more typically seen in the Deep South and Caribbean. In addition, the layout of the plantation is meticulous and purposeful, suggesting a desire on the part of the Vincendière family to manipulate the landscape to reinforce their physical and psychological power. For example, the chimney foundations are evenly spaced at 66 ft, or four rods, and the dwellings themselves are aligned, within a tenth of a degree, to the main house and the secondary house, which likely housed an overseer. The secondary house is centered within the row, and both it and the main house are sited on an elevation that ensures an unobstructed view of the slave quarters. The relationship of the “row of wooden houses” to the secondary house and main house suggests a conscious desire on the part of the Vincendière family to monitor and control the enslaved population, perhaps out of fear of the kind of rebellion that they escaped in Saint-Domingue.

The eye-witness account references another method of control that the Vincendières favored; research has shown that between 1797 and 1800 Jean Payen was tried on several different occasions for criminal charges ranging from “cruelly & unmercifully beating & whipping” various slaves to “not providing [them] sufficient Meat & Cloathing.” During the same time period, Victoire Vincendière was tried for “excessively cruelly & unmercifully beating” one of her slaves and “assaulting” another one. Most of the cases were quashed, but Victoire and Payen were found guilty in one case each, although it is not clear what punishment, if any, was handed down.

Resistance

Despite their attempts to control the enslaved population, and their proclivity for inflicting severe punishment, the enslaved individuals at *L'Hermitage* managed to resist. Excavations at the slave village site have uncovered caches of silver coins, beads and amulets, flaked stone tools that may suggest evidence of spiritual practices. In addition, advertisements for several runaway slaves have surfaced, including one for a slave called Pierre Louis.

Although he was not successful in his attempt to run away – he was captured in Philadelphia and returned to *L'Hermitage* – Pierre Louis managed to use the legal system to gain his freedom. He secured emancipation by proving in court that although he was brought to the United States by Jean Payen, he actually belonged to Jean Payen's deceased brother and was therefore brought to the United States illegally. After three years of legal wrangling and a number of appeals, the Frederick County Court upheld his claim and granted Pierre Louis his freedom. He continued to reside in Frederick County as a free person of color until at least 1820.

Perhaps the greatest weapon that the enslaved individuals at *L'Hermitage* had at their disposal was survival. Records indicate that the plantation was in decline by the second decade of the nineteenth century after the death of Jean Payen and several other members of the

Vincendière household. In the 1820s, Victoire Vincendière began selling large numbers of slaves to dealers from Baltimore, Louisiana, Tennessee, and elsewhere. In a strange twist, a handful of enslaved laborers were manumitted at this time as well. An extensive descendency analysis has recently been undertaken by a certified genealogist; this research has revealed that slaves from *L'Hermitage* went on to work as waiters, washerwomen, and barbers, and in one case to serve in the Union Navy during the Civil War. But within a few generations, descendants of *L'Hermitage* slaves could count several college graduates, doctors, educators, social workers, architects, and even a National Park Service employee among their numbers. The genealogical research project is an important companion to the larger historical and archeological research project, and has identified a living descendant community with the potential to provide a great deal more information about this important and complex story.

Conclusion

The archeological excavations at the site of *L'Hermitage* are complete. A funding request has been submitted to continue the genealogical research, and the National Park Service plans to reach out to the descendant community and share with them the results of over a decade of research. We are also in the process of developing a number of interpretive products and programs that will help tell the story of *L'Hermitage* to the public and are working closely with the Frederick County School District on the development of curriculum based on the site. The story has garnered a great deal of media interest; it has been featured on NPR, CNN, and elsewhere and was the subject of a major feature article in *ESSENCE* magazine.

While much of the public interest has focused on the more lurid details of the story, we are hopeful that discussions and dialogue about *L'Hermitage* can continue to evolve. As the National Park Service begins its commemoration of the Civil War — whose origins stem from the social, economic, and political issues surrounding slavery — we will continue to seek a deeper understanding of the lives of those individuals who lived and labored at *L'Hermitage*.